

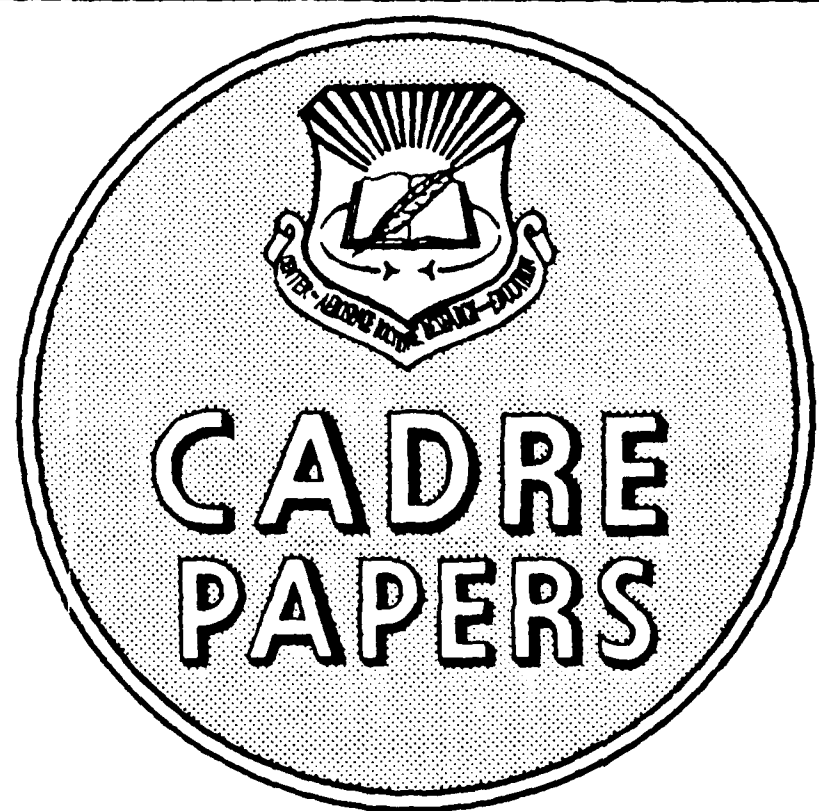
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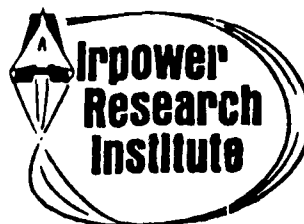
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SOME OBSERVATIONS
ON
ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

by
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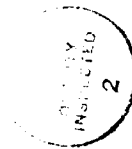
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Islam is a faith of paradoxes. Islamic sociopolitical values have in theory remained changeless over the centuries, and yet Islam has demonstrated a genius for adaptation to diverse cultural environments. It is a religion of absolute universal validity, marked indelibly with a narrow Arab point of view. Under Islam, stable political institutions have rarely prospered, but the religion has nonetheless survived as a supremely political faith. This last paradox is perhaps the most interesting now that Islam has entered a revolutionary phase in its historical development. This article addresses the question of the Islamic political paradox and, in the context of the coming to power in Iran of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, will attempt to establish a perspective from which present circumstances can be understood and judged.

When the Shah of Iran was deposed, a successor state was declared through which Islam would act to renew Iranian society. As a consequence, the messianic, anti-imperialistic, reactionary, and highly activist temper of Iranian Shiite sectarianism gained the attention of the world community. Thus a climate of awareness came about in which, according to Egyptian social philosopher Anouar Abdel-Malek, Islam ceased to be perceived as a mere accumulation of facts but as a deployment of forces. The new government of the Islamic Republic of Iran took for its cardinal political principle that religion alone can serve to motivate and engineer human social progress. Because Islam had for so long been thought irrelevant to the process of nation-building in the Middle East, this political principle was greeted with skepticism in the West. Be that as it may, the challenge set in

motion new efforts to rethink the fundamental propositions of Muslim religious culture so as better to examine the growing incompatibility which informs the clash of Western and Eastern world views.

The approach to the challenge set down by Islamic revolutionism has taken two complementary directions. In the first instance the ancient texts of Shiite law have been reexamined in the light of Ayatollah Khomeini's claim that Islam sanctions the administration of divine law by the clerical establishment for the salvation of the Community of Believers. And in the second instance attention has been paid to the evolution of Iranian political culture in which such a reading of canon law finds its rationale. As a result Western scholarship has made the first tentative step toward a reinterpretation of the diversity of Islamic political behavior. This requires that certain historical facts, already known but hitherto not given proper weight, be accorded a new prominence.

Sectarianism in Islam emerged fourteen centuries ago from a simple political dispute over the question of who was best fit to rule the divinely inspired community. The minority party contended that the guidance of the Islamic nation must remain hereditarily in the hands of the Prophet's family in direct succession from his cousin, son-in-law, and fourth deputy, Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Rejecting this view outright, the majority party required only that the deputy of the Prophet be from among his tribe, the Quraysh.* The quarrel was decided in the

*Henceforth, those partisans who promoted the cause of Ali would be known as the Shiat Ali--the party of Ali--or the Shiites. Those who opposed them believed that they were following the established norm of prophetic behavior to the letter, the Prophet's sunna. Thereafter they were known as Sunnites. The early years of Islam saw a struggle between these two factions for control of the office of caliph--the "deputy" of Muhammad.

course of a civil war that raged during the first century of Muslim life. At first glance this struggle had all the earmarks of a typical Arabian clan feud. But the questions to be resolved were considerably more complex than simple tribal disagreements, for as the Arabs expanded beyond the confines of the Arabian peninsula into the sophisticated, urban, multiethnic Perso-Byzantine milieu, it became increasingly more difficult to maintain the traditional egalitarianism of Bedouin ways whereby the most prominent tribal leader governs as first among equals with the consent of his contemporaries. For this reason the governance of a multiethnic empire demanded a more highly evolved differentiation of sociopolitical functions than was admitted by the comparatively simpler Bedouin ways. Once the main centers of the Perso-Byzantine world had fallen to the new religion, the Arabs adopted the concept of secular kingship at the cost of severing the spiritual from the temporal functions of rulership which, having been historically united in the person of the Prophet Muhammad for the salvation of Allah's community, had always served as the principal prop of Islamic political theory.

The early Shiites sought refuge from Sunnite persecution among the newly islamicized Persians, whose glorious civilization had suffered greatly from Arab imperial expansion. The Shiites made common cause with the Persians, whom they converted to their politico-religious world view. In turn the early Shiites assimilated the ancient Persian imperial concept of divinely ordained rulership. Thus, the insistence of the Shiites that the spiritual and temporal offices of prophetic deputyship be joined in a male person descended

from the Caliph Ali acquired great popular currency. On this basis the legitimacy of a divinely inspired ruling institution in which authority was passed down to first-born sons was clearly established for a Shiite imamate,* and a spiritual shadow government arose to challenge the Sunnite Arabs which the Arabs, notwithstanding the superior force of their arms, were unable to eradicate.

As a persecuted minority within the Sunnite Arabo-Islamic empire, the Shiites began slowly to show that particular disposition for the esoteric that characterizes all marginally accepted religious sects. They encouraged the artful concealment of their religious identity so as to protect the integrity of their community. They exalted their martyrs, especially the third Imam Hussein who was murdered by their enemies. And when in the middle of the ninth century the Shiite imamate was interrupted by the mysterious disappearance of the twelfth Imam in succession, they entertained the messianic notion that he had not in fact died but was simply in hiding and would reappear in the fullness of time as the Rightly-Guided One to right the wrongs of the world. The early Shiites had assimilated this idea from their Persian coreligionists and so were content to lead lives in pious expectation of its fulfillment.

In the absence of the Hidden Imam, there persisted among the Twelver Shiites--as the mainstream of Shiism was now to be called--the nagging problem of political authority. Reconciled to the reappearance of the Rightly-Guided One after a long period of tyranny and to

*The leader of the Shiite community was to be known as the "Imam," which denotes his supreme religious role among the believers.

the eventuality that while he remained incommunicado, false claims would be made by those who claimed to have seen him, the Shiites carefully elaborated a doctrine of general agency that required believers to avoid appealing to the authority of Sunnite rulers in whose territories they lived but whose power they considered illegitimate. Instead they were encouraged to look to their clergy for guidance. This doctrine, however, forbade the clergy to fill the Hidden Imam's place, to share in his infallibility, or to claim that they served as oracles of his message. Theirs was the special but limited obligation to interpret the Hidden Imam's law by virtue of their superior knowledge so as to preserve the religious identity of the Shiite community. Until the renaissance of a Persian imperial state at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the actual political influence that the clergy exercised over their community was extremely circumscribed.

If those best qualified to interpret the law guaranteed the continuity of imamic rule, then it was logical to assume that for each generation one Shiite cleric must exist to express the consensus of his peers so that the "straight path" would remain clear and unequivocal for the believers. This cleric carried the honorific title "ayatollah"* and was thought to be "the source of emulation." Together the Shiite clergy constituted a class of men called mujtahidun who alone were permitted the practice of ijtihad--the deductive reasoning whereby the specific details of observance were derived from the basic principles of imamic revelation. Thus the

*Token or Sign of God; from Arabic, ayat Allah.

Shiite clergy enjoyed by virtue of the theory of general agency much more prestige among the faithful than their Sunnite counterparts.

In point of fact, the imperial apparatus of the Arabo-Islamic empire had already co-opted the Sunnite clergy, whose task it was to maintain the status quo of the Islamic community against the irrepressible conflict among rulers who had never fully abandoned the Bedouin notion of election to the caliphal office. Hence, the Sunnite empire was rife with extreme forms of political abuse, which the clergy felt honor-bound to arbitrate. Faced with continual instability, the Sunnite clergy assumed an accommodating posture toward power since they believed, in contradistinction to their Shiite counterparts, that in the Islamic nation--as expressed politically by the imperial state--resided the infallibility of religious truth. Inasmuch as the Sunnite clergy represented as a class the consensus of that truth, the responsibility for the unity of Islam fell upon their shoulders. Adhering to the Quranic injunction that every Muslim must forbid evil and command the good, the Sunnite clergy counseled the caliphs, all the while forbearing under their injustice, to promote the Prophet's dictum that his community was free from error and to set thereby the interests of Islam above their own personal desires. Theoretically, then, the Sunnite clergy recognized a limited right to rebel against temporal tyranny, but as a result of the separation of their religious functions from the exercise of state power, they were more prone to take a passive attitude toward unjust authority. To the Shiites this seemed an unacceptable bargain struck with the ungodly.

The Shiite community of Iran profited from almost nine hundred years of isolation from the exercise of political power to work out

the theoretical implications of its doctrinal differences with the Sunnite world. As a consequence of its divorce from the practical considerations of rulership, Shiite dogmatics acquired a high moral tone and evolved a canon of law that was intellectually pure yet naive with respect to the requirements of the temporal world. When a Persian empire was reestablished under the Safavid shahs at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Shiite clergy was obliged to redefine its position on temporal authority. This momentous change in the direction of Shiite thought, which secured for Shiism the patronage of state power and guaranteed the integration of the Shiite clergy into the imperial Persian political culture, eventually threatened the independence of that clergy and led inevitably to its transformation into an official class of Persian society.

By putting a state apparatus at the disposal of the clergy, the Safavids assured both the survival of Shiism as the official religion of the Persian people and the preeminence among them of the mujtahidun. In return the rulers required them to acquiesce to the fiction of Safavid dynastic descent from the first Imam, Ali. As long as the Safavids ruled justly and did not presume to pronounce that through their line the Rightly-Guided One would accomplish his preordained mission on earth, an uneasy truce between the temporal and spiritual authorities of the Shiite Persian empire obtained. Yet the more the shahs pressured the clergy to concede its leadership in religious matters before an imperial concept of divine, absolute monarchy, the more the theoretical possibility of clerical opposition to the state gained ground.

The efforts of the Safavid shahs to transform the clergy into an adjunctive arm of the imperial bureaucracy was no doubt great but not as great as the resistance evinced by the clergy itself. The clergy had at its disposal from the times of Sunnite hegemony sources of revenue derived from a tithing of the faithful and from religious endowments established for the care and renovation of mosques, holy shrines, and Quranic schools that had been kept out of the reach of the rapacious shahs. The Safavids wished to dispossess the clergy of this autonomy, knowing full well that here was the source of an alternative focus of power to imperial rule. The shahs did not succeed entirely, but they did manage to introduce the seeds of philosophic schism into the ranks of the mujtahidun with respect to the position the clergy should adopt to state power.

When finally Safavid rule decayed and the more despotic Qajars acceded to the throne in the late-eighteenth century, the clergy remained essentially indifferent. As long as the ayatollahs confined their pronouncements to the interpretation of textual material from the Shiite canon of law and did not interfere in the running of the secular state, they could avoid ruffling the sensitive feathers of the ruling establishment. This passivity was soon challenged, however, by a more politically active wing of clerical dissenters, and the right to the independent exercise of ijtihad was reasserted. In the schism that followed, the older Shiite traditions triumphed. Thus, the need for personal reasoning in what was viewed as an inevitable conflict of interpretation was vouchsafed, and clerical authority was reconfirmed in all concrete instances of litigation not on the basis of dogmatic

legitimization by the Hidden Imam but as the natural historical process of evolution in which the need for interpretation of the law in the face of a weak state could no longer be denied. Contrary to Sunnite principles, the practice of referring all questions of faith and practice was returned to the Grand Ayatollah of each age. Although the ayatollah would never deign to pretend that his right to such exalted jurisdiction proceeded from the Hidden Imam, this was precisely the import of events.

Before the preponderant force of Russian imperialism, the writ of the Qajar dynasty steadily retreated, and by the early twentieth century the power of the clergy to act positively to protect the faith from ungodly foreign innovation, whether Muslim or Christian, had grown commensurately. The unrelenting political pressure of the Russians for extraterritorial concessions and later of the British for economic advantages under the pretext of modernizing reforms moved the Qajars to attempt the alienation of clerical holdings. Because the clergy believed that the state had become the puppet of the unbelievers, reforms were opposed in the name of the Hidden Imam--an opposition justified by a theory of government that, by regarding as political rather than moral the Quranic injunction to command good and forbid evil--granted the clergy the possibility of open protest. To this were added historical traditions of a minority faith in a country now almost completely Shiite and the concept of martyrdom inherent in the pantheon of imamic saints. Thus, one can easily understand to what degree the activism of a fundamentally conservative clergy had been reinforced.

It was under these circumstances that the Qajar shah decided on the proclamation of a constitution in 1906. From the point of view of the mujtahidun, this final attack of a moribund regime directed against the legitimate representatives of its official faith pointed obviously to the influence which the European powers could now exert on a divinely instituted polity. But rather than withdraw stoically from constitutional deliberations, the clergy paradoxically led the struggle to procure a document tailored to meet their needs in the belief that even by means of such a contemptible device as Western parliamentarianism the arbitrary Qajar kings could be brought to heel. Many clergymen stood for election to the Constituent Assembly despite the fact that their participation was clearly incompatible with imamic political practice. In so doing the clergy did not impugn the monarchy as much as they exposed its autocracy and the degradation of Shiite principles, to which the encroachment of the West had ultimately led.

Placing themselves, thus, in the vanguard of popular political agitation against the excesses of Qajar authority so as better to protect their inherited privileges and historical autonomy, the ayatollahs received in token of the evolution of their class interest recognition as an official stratum of Iranian society. And yet a serious problem remained. The concession in principle to Western democratic procedure, in whose name the clergy had accepted election as the representatives of the popular will, implied the sovereignty of that will. This implied that decisions taken for the good of Islam and

to preserve clerical prerogatives would ultimately depend on the will of the people and not on that of the Hidden Imam.

Here, in summary, we see the development of a political culture in which the present Iranian Islamic government has taken shape but for which there exists no doctrinal precedent with respect to the right of the ayatollahs to wield power. Hence, the government of Ayatollah Khomeini, as the product of the long struggle between the religious class and the imperial state for primacy in Shiite affairs, reflects a departure from the traditional passive, pious, and other-worldly ethos of Shiism.

To say that Ayatollah Khomeini's right to make positive law for Iran in the absence of the Hidden Imam is dogmatically suspect is to understate the contradiction in the religious underpinning of the Iranian Islamic Republic. The democracy to which the present Iranian government pretends underscores the unassimilated baggage of a political culture that the Shiite religious establishment has, for a generation, been obliged to carry since Iran's emergence as a modern society with links to the West. Because the Islamic government of Iran has had to make a compromise with the principle of the sovereignty of popular will--a concept which, being so totally alien to the Shiite world view, it has no intention of implementing--democracy in Iran cannot help being fragile. Despite the recent popular referendum for the presidency of the republic, the reluctant acceptance of the notion of political pluralism, and the election of a constituent assembly stacked by the clergy. Ayatollah Khomeini has been waging an internal holy war for right belief to protect his

fledgling revolution against the forces of the left which, having given obligatory lip service to the compatibility of Islam and Western social radicalism, wait patiently for the demise of the clerical government. In keeping with Shiite tradition, civil authority has, since the overthrow of the secular presidency of Abolhassen Bani-Sadr in 1981, been divested of any real meaning, and the clergy, ill-suited to the rationale of secular administration, now dominates the office.

The degeneration of the Islamic state in the aftermath of the overthrow of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi is therefore assured. What may follow in its wake is purely a matter of conjecture, but it is plain that once the Islam of the Shiite mujtahidun has proven itself incapable of governance, the centrifugal forces of ethnic separatism will reappear in the form of a demand for autonomy within the central government. Without doubt, this will lead to a renewal of Soviet interest in the Iranian situation.

The real danger to global interests, however, arises not from the dismemberment of Iran itself but from the energy released beyond Iran's borders as the revolution begins to consume itself within, for the political culture that gave rise to the Khomeini revolution may also provoke a transnational holy war against the West and its Sunnite clients in the Gulf. Since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the Shiite clergy has always believed that the West will be found at the root of the Islamic malaise. That the influence of the unbelievers over the Muslim world must be purged and Islam made clean of this contagion through the renaissance of the Islamic world order is the primary political tenet of Khomeini's political doctrine. For this

reason, Khomeini has declare holy war against the oil-rich Sunnite governments that have been tainted by too close an association with the American "Great Satan."

The unfortunate miscalculation that encouraged Iraq to invade Iran and to attempt to divest Khomeini of his power only strengthened the psychological factors of resistance inherent in Shiism. This resistance has, in fact, brought about the triumph of the Iranian martyr-state over the best equipped military in the Gulf. The threat by Khomeini to prosecute this war until the Shiite majority of Iraq is liberated from its Sunnite oppressors must be take seriously. No wonder, then that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain fear that their Shiite minorities will be the next to respond to the inflammatory politics of Khomeini with an orgy of insurrectional disorders. Thus, before the drama of the Iranian revolution plays itself out, it is not improbable that the countries of the Gulf will experience the impact of these changed circumstances in the disruption of the delicate status quo that holds sway over the tenuous geopolitics of a troubled region.